

## **i want to know about these strangers like me by heartofwinterfell**

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**Summary:**

You can learn a lot in the month of December.

[or, five new things El learns from her new friends and one thing she shows them]

## **i want to know about these strangers like me**

### **Author's Note:**

Welcome to the happy, beautiful, pure world where El defeats the demogorgon, no harm comes to her, and they all live happily ever after.

### **i: snowballs**

Snow swirled outside, coating the Wheeler's front lawn in an untouched blanket of pure white. Perched on the top of the basement couch, the four boys pressed their noses up to the window, fogging up the glass with hot breath from half-opened mouths, eyes transfixed on the wonderland building around the house. Mike jumped off the couch's back, bouncing on the cushions below, before landing with a thud on the floor. Eleven looked up from her spot at the table, hands stilled around the game piece she had been fiddling with. Mike smiled at her quickly before running to the bottom of the stairs.

"Mom! Can we go outside?"

Something clanged in the kitchen. Mrs. Wheeler appeared at the top landing of the stairs, young Holly on her hip. "Only if you promise you'll be washed up and ready for dinner in an hour."

Moments later, after fighting into oversized coats, mittens pulled on by their teeth, the boys pushed their way outside. Dustin and Lucas raced each other to be the first footsteps to mark the pristine lawn, Dustin only winning by collapsing into the snow, creating a snow angel that looked to have fallen from heaven face first. Will hung back in the driveway, pink tongue poking out to collect snowflakes. El lingered in the doorway, bundled up in an old white jacket of Nancy's. She reached a pink-gloved hand out and a few snowflakes landed on her outstretched palm. She brought the glove up to her face, inspecting each carefully. Mike looked on from his spot only a few feet away, mouth suddenly dry. The glow from the doorway encompassed El, highlighted her searching eyes and the way her mouth upturned as she looked at her snowflakes.

“Pretty,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Mike replied breathlessly. He cleared his throat and forced his eyes away, looking out at the streetlamps, the roofs blanketed with snow, his friends tussling in the yard. He only glanced back when he felt the color rush out of his cheeks. “Is this your first time ever seeing snow?”

El looked up, the tiny smile still on her face, and nodded. Her eyes roamed all the places his had moments ago, taking in a world of all white that did not feel sterile and hard, but safe and soft. She drifted out of the doorway, moving closer to the yard where the snow was now littered with boot prints. Mike followed, but kept a small distance between them, letting her explore this new side of the world for herself.

Everything felt quiet, the kind of quiet that felt peaceful and warm. Too quiet and peaceful to last – Dustin came bounding over with a perfectly packed snowball resting between two mittens. “Come on, we wanna have a snowball fight!”

Dustin wound up his arm to throw the snowball at Mike. Eleven flinched, taking a step back at the sudden movement and seemingly malice intent, and Mike held out his arm quickly, enough to stop Dustin just before launch. Mike moved forward and took the ball from Dustin. He turned to El and motioned for her to hold out her hands. She took a skeptical step forward, but held out her hand anyway. Mike handed her the snowball, watching as her eyes searched his face and then searched the snow in her hand.

“It’s just a snowball,” Mike said, smiling a little too eagerly to prove the snowball and Dustin meant no harm.

El’s eyes shot up, a faint blush dusting her cheeks. “Snow ball?”

“What?” Mike wrinkled his eyebrows in confusion, until – “No! No, I don’t mean...this is like a snowball that you make and you throw it at people...” El scrunched her nose. “For fun, it’s like a game...a snowball fight...only you’re not actually fighting, it’s just pretend. The Snow Ball is...it’s different...”

Mike's cheeks went from the pale pink shade of cold to the bright red shade of embarrassment. Behind him, somewhere, Lucas started making kissing noises and El looked even more perplexed by it all. "Here, watch." Mike leaned down and made a messy snowball of his own before whirling around and pelting it at Lucas, missing by a good five feet. Lucas and Will laughed and went back to building the small snow wall they had been constructing all this time.

"Snowball fight..." El said slowly, turning the literal snowball over in her hands.

"Yeah, for fun," Mike repeated lamely, scratching behind his ear, face still hot.

El kept staring at the snowball, patting it once with her hand. Then in a flash, she drew back her arm and launched that snowball at Mike, hitting him square in the chest. "Hey!"

She giggled, the sound nearly drowned out by the howling from the other boys. Dustin raced past a still stunned Mike and grabbed El's hand, pulling her toward the opposite side of the lawn from the Will and Lucas fort. "Fight starts now! El's on my team!"

Mike ended up ducking for cover behind the fort as Will and Lucas raced to fill up their snowball reserves. The three boys were forced to wave the white flag after only ten minutes of intense fighting. It didn't exactly seem fair when one team had a telepath who could always hit her targets.

## ii: *star wars*

Everything was warm in the Wheeler living room – warm quilts, warm light, warm hearts, warm mugs nestled in warm hands. Each mug was filled to the brim with hot chocolate, marshmallows bobbing in all but one cup. Dustin had slurped his out, the proof in the mug and the dribbles of hot chocolate on his t-shirt. He was a little too close to the television set, chin rested on his folded arms and eyes locked on the television screen. The others had chosen to sit on the couch, all shoulder to shoulder, all equally entranced by the

television.

Luke and Obi-Wan had just entered the cantina and Dustin's feet were kicking the floor in excitement. At the end of the couch, Lucas rolled his eyes and nudged Will. He said nothing, too distracted by the movie and nearly as excited as Dustin. On the other end of the couch, Mike spent more time looking at El than at the screen, trying to discern from her expressions how she felt about the boys' favorite movie. She only looked with her usual observance, taking it all in. Dustin had voiced concern earlier that El would think *Star Wars* was a real event that happened. Lucas had helpfully pointed out that she watched them play Dungeons and Dragons multiple times and never questioned if that was real while Will added that if telepaths were real, who's to say what happened in the stars. That sent Dustin off on a whole string of new theories.

So far, El had not asked if anything in the movie was real, proving Lucas's point. She hadn't said anything at all, not yet.

Though, the fact that they kept shushing Dustin for piping up could have discouraged her.

Han Solo appeared on the screen for the first time and Dustin let out a loud cheer, bringing on a chorus of shushing. Instead of quieting down again, Dustin looked back at El while reaching a hand out and pointing at the screen. "That's Han Solo, he's the best. And that's Chewbacca."

"Come on, Dustin, we're trying to watch," Lucas said, tossing a pillow that landed on Dustin's back.

Dustin flipped over, tossing the pillow back in Lucas's direction only to hit Will in the face. "Sorry," Dustin said quickly before turning back to Lucas. "I'm making sure she doesn't get lost."

"Chewbacca," El repeated, looking at the character on the screen, evaluating.

"Yeah, he's a wookiee and he's awesome," Dustin said.

"Wookiee?" El asked, crinkling her eyebrows.

Dustin opened his mouth to speak what would undoubtedly be a long explanation of wookiees and their culture that had all the boys yelling “No!” complete with frantic hand gestures to stop him. Dustin frowned, narrowing his eyes at his three friends. “I’ll tell you later, El.”

El nodded, even with the confusion still evident on her face, no doubt increased by all the reactions going on around her. Yet, through it all, she kept her focus on the movie and in all her confusion, there seemed to be a spark of interest and enjoyment, entertained even while feeling lost.

The scene reached its climax as Han shot Greedo. El jumped at the sudden flashes of light and laser sound and on reflex, Mike took her hand in his and squeezed once. She returned the squeeze, a little hesitantly, but she never pulled her hand away, not once over the hour and a half they had left of the movie.

They spend a good hour after the credits letting Dustin explain all the nuances of the universe to El with Lucas, Will, and Mike sometimes interrupting and adding trivia of their own. El asked questions, nodded her head upwards of a hundred times, and let the boys talk and talk without the word nerd or geek drifting into the conversation. Eventually, Lucas and Dustin biked home even with the remnants of last week’s snowstorm still on the ground. Will and El waited for Jonathan to arrive and when he did, Mike walked them to the front door.

Will rushed out to meet his brother, but El waited a moment in the doorway, looking at Mike with a curious expression. Mike swallowed before asking, “So, did you like the movie?”

El nodded once, but sometime else clearly lingered on her mind. They stood a moment in silence before El said softly, “I liked Luke. He reminded me of you.”

The car horn honked before Mike could respond and he saw Will running back across the lawn to lead El over the car. Mike waved as they went, his cheeks red and his smile wide and it felt like even the stars were smiling back.

### iii: *should i stay or should i go*

The bedroom was cramped and eclectic now – Clash posters intermingled with *Star Wars* memorabilia, a slither of space between two twin beds, books edging into the space occupied by camera equipment. The room across the hall looked barren in comparison with its solitary twin bed with a sunny yellow comforter and little decoration on the walls save the one *Star Wars* poster, not left over from when Will occupied the room but a gift from Dustin given days after they all watched the movie together. It's as if he had known El had not known what to do with all the freedom to decorate a room how she pleased.

On the twin bed closest to the window, Will riffled through the side table drawer, El beside him looking out at the woods beyond. Plastic rattled against wood until Will fished out the cassette he had been looking for. The cassette player remained in its spot under the window, undisturbed since Will had moved in. He popped the cassette tape in and pressed play. Instantly, the familiar opening chords of "Should I Stay or Should I Go" flooded the room.

"Did you have music when you were..." Will trailed off. He had become the one who would ask the unapproachable questions when all others backed away. Lucas never asked, Dustin blurted out and then retracted, Mike tiptoed and let her speak first, but Will asked and looked interested and let her not answer or answer in time.

El took a moment before shaking her head. They let the Clash fill the silence for a while before Will spoke again. "Well, Jonathan has tons of music and once you figure out what you like, he can even make you mixtapes."

"Mixtape?"

"Yeah, a mixtape." Will paused, thrumming his fingers against his knee for a second while staring into the space between the window frame and the ceiling. "It's like a tape, but instead of having songs from one band, it has songs from a lot of different people." Will glanced behind him at door, motioning there and towards the outside where Jonathan was making breakfast. "Jonathan makes me a few. I also think he's been making some for Nancy and not giving them to

her.”

“Why?” El asked and Will shrugged his shoulders, an easy smile on his face.

“He likes her, but he’s too scared to actually do anything.” Will shrugged again and the song came to an end. They listened to the tape until Jonathan yelled that it was time for school.

Over the course of the week, El and Will repeated a sweet routine of listening to a tape in the hours before Will had to go school or they were called to dinner. On Friday, El approached Jonathan shyly and asked him to make her a mixtape. That night, just as Jonathan arrived to pick her and Will up from the Wheeler’s house, El pressed the tape into Mike’s hands.

When Mike played the tape later that night, he smiled when “Should I Stay or Should I Go” began to play.

#### *iv: shopping*

The mall hummed with the sounds of life. The mother shepherding their children into department stores, the teenagers weaving through the crowds on skateboards and the security that ran after them, the young girls popping from store to store as they smacked bright pink bubblegum and giggled as boys walked by – they all congregated here. El trailing after Nancy did not seem like such a strange sight here, only two girls lost in a sea of people with their own preoccupations.

This was one of the first times El was without Joyce or the boys, but distinctly not on her own. She followed Nancy closely, almost to the point of clinging on her cardigan, flinching back whenever someone drew to close. Nancy was vigilant to that, always offering sweet smiles, taking her wrist once or twice to lead them towards a less crowded area. It was the Christmas season and everyone had somewhere to go, suddenly immune to personal space. Yet, Nancy was Mike’s sister and if the Wheelers could do anything, it was keeping their friends safe.



Nancy led them into a smaller store that smelled strongly of flowers. Every wrack was overflowing with dresses, taffeta puffing out in all directions. Nancy began browsing, pulling out two smaller dresses and draping them over her arm. Every now and then, she'd look over to make sure El was still by her side. And every time, she smiled and El did her best to smile back.

Another woman brought them back to a dressing room, narrow spaces that left El hesitating at the door. Nancy rested a hand on her shoulder and whispered, "I'll be right out here, I promise."

El entered the room and went to shut the door, but decided to leave it open a crack. She gazed at the dresses Nancy had picked out for her, shades of light blue and pink reminiscent of the first dress she had ever worn. Nancy's dress.

She walked out of the dressing room, though the wide skirt of the pink dress preceded her. Nancy grinned and nudged her towards the mirror. From the neck down, there was the girl who visited Mike's middle school. From the neck up, it was still El with the shaved head and she frowned and looked up at Nancy.

"Pretty?"

The word hung in the air, longing and doubt intermingling. Nancy sighed softly then and wrapped her arms around El's shoulders and El did not flinch at the contact. "Can I tell you a secret?" Nancy asked and El nodded. "Other people don't get to tell you what's pretty and what isn't. All that matters is what you feel. So don't let anyone ever tell you that you aren't beautiful the way you are."

Nancy took a step back and inspected the dress again. "Why don't we go out and you can pick the things you like the most?"

They came back to the dressing room with another handful of dresses, a few more shades of pink and one snow white with a bright red sash. When El exited the dressing room in the white dress, Nancy gasped. El panicked for a moment at the sound, rushing back to shut the door, but Nancy shook her head and brought her back to the mirror and El gasped too.

Nancy hugged her again and whispered, “I think you’re ready for the Snow Ball.”

*v: snow ball*

The wall now had two pictures on it – the *Star Wars* poster and a picture of two girls in fancy dresses striking an exaggerated pose. Nancy had smiled at the picture when she walked in, armed with a box of make-up. The sounds of another Clash song drifted through the house as Nancy dipped her brush into the blush. The scene was nothing like the time Mike had tried his hand at make-up; Nancy’s strokes were more calculated and precise. And she kept her eye on the clock – 6:49 PM. Ironically, eleven minutes to go.

In the room across the hall, Mike paced nervously across the small space as Jonathan did his best to fix Will’s tie. “Jessica Hayes won’t know what hit her,” Jonathan said with a wink to Will.

“Jennifer Hayes.”

Will and Jonathan both laughed, but Mike continued pacing. At times, he’d stop to fidget with one of Will’s figurines before starting his circular walk again. Finally, Jonathan and Will banished him into the living room where Dustin and Lucas were eating the assortment of snacks Mrs. Byers had put out for them. He had more room to pace, but people more merciless in their torments surrounded him. Lucas started making kissing noises, a recurring trend, and Mike had no snowballs to throw at him. He settled for a pretzel and it took all of five seconds for the room to erupt in a food fight.

The girls chose that moment to come out of the room, Nancy demanding to know why they always had to ruin everything with stupid fights. El walked in behind her, head ducked and cheeks rosy from both blush and nervousness. The boys ceased fire, all looking to the hallway and to El.

The white dress skimmed her knees and perfectly matched the white shoes borrowed from Nancy. The red of the sash stood out against the pristine white of the dress, striking but not enough to distract from the face of the girl wearing the dress. Not enough for Mike, who kept

staring even after Lucas began snickering and Dustin reach for the discarded pretzels to eat.

“Mike, get your jaw off the floor,” Jonathan said, he and Will sliding past El and into the living room. Nancy hit Jonathan in the arm, but she was smiling a bit too smugly.

The moment of uncomfortable silence passed when Joyce Byers entered the room and demanded Jonathan get his camera so she could have a picture of her little boys and girl going to their first Snow Ball. Will groaned and rolled his eyes in embarrassment, but they all still hooked their arms around each other for a photo, Mike’s arm wrapped tightly around El’s waist.

They were then whisked off to the ball, their chariots belonging to Nancy and Jonathan, stopping only to pick up Jennifer Hayes who gave Will a peck on the cheek when he arrived on her doorstep.

When they entered the gymnasium, it was hard to believe assemblies and basketball games and the horrors of gym existed in the space. Lanterns dangled from the ceiling, the light catching on the glittering snowflakes hung beside them. Long white tables lined the sides of the room, filled to the brim with cookies, cakes, and bright red punch bowls. The room was already packed with people, many dancing to the pop music emitted from the DJ’s speakers.

The group split off. Dustin spotted Mr. Clarke as chaperone and dragged Lucas along with him to talk about radios and alternate dimensions. Jennifer Hayes pulled Will to the dance floor and from the helpless look Will threw him, Mike and El should follow suit for Will’s safety. Mike moved closer to El, their hands brushing. For a moment, he could only stare at her again. She was glowing under the lantern light. She was always glowing.

The music slowed and couples populated the dance floor. Mike’s face matched the red of the punch bowls as he took El’s hand in his own. “Do you want to maybe dance...with me?”

El looked between him and the couples, drifting together, virtually no space between them. “How?”

"I can show you." Mike nodded, once, twice, reassuring as he moved towards the dance floor, El's hand still in his. He carved out a spot near Jennifer and Will, on the fringes, and slowly placed his hands on El's hips. "Now...you're supposed to put your arms around my neck."

El glanced at a couple dancing close by, then at Jennifer and Will, at the way her arms perfectly wound around his neck and pulled him closer, the way they swayed together. As slowly as Mike had, El looped her arms around his neck. Both blushing, both looking down at their feet, they took their first step, out of time, but together. They swayed, out of rhythm, but close and gently, safe and easy.

As the song reached its closing chords, Mike gazed at her and blurted out, "I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you're...I'm glad you're safe. Thanks for coming to this ball with me."

El smiled at him, that tiny and dazed smile, the smile that was on her face in that moment when he had kissed her and they had a second to revel in it. The song struck a final, lingering note. "We promised."

#### + *stranger things*

Young boys spent Christmas Eves with their families huddled around the tree, sitting near the fire, waiting up for Santa Clause. Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will decided that they had outgrown that this year (though Dustin brought up the fact that if telepaths and demogorgons existed, why couldn't Santa). Twelve-year-old boys spent Christmas Eve sneaking out the junkyard with their telepath to accept the mysterious presents El had promised them. Mike assumed it would mix tapes or perhaps *Star Wars* merchandise, but Will said he and his mom had explained presents to El and it seemed to spark on idea in her mind.

The idea led them to the junkyard, frigid on a late December night. The boys were bundled up, collars up to their pink noses. The cold did not seem to phase El; she had her mittens and her white coat, but she trekked ahead of them all without a shiver, bringing them by the old bus they had hidden in, a time that felt like eons ago. Will coughed in the back and Dustin whispered, "What are we doing here again?"

El looked at him directly. "Presents." She reached into the backpack she had been carrying and pulled out a model of the Millennium Falcon, a model that had to have come from Mike's house. Mike opened his mouth to ask how she had been able to take it without him noticing when El let it drop from her hands. Instead of crashing to the ground and shattering, the Falcon hovered for a moment, suspended inches above the ground. It then zoomed through the air, flying in the space between Dustin and Will as they looked on stunned. The plastic ship zigzagged, flipped upside, performed the tricks all seen in the movie. Finally, it came to rest at Mike's feet.

"That was so cool!" Dustin yelled. "It was like it was the real Millennium Falcon! What else can you make fly?"

"Fly..." El trailed off, glancing around the junkyard, eyes landing on an old convertible left to rot. She pointed to the rusted car and motioned them to follow her. When they reached the junk, she pointed again, now to the ripped leather seats as if telling them to climb in.

"Is she serious?" Dustin asked, leaning over toward Lucas and Will like it made his voice incapable of travelling. El nodded in response. The boys all shared a look before Will shrugged and climbed into the passenger seat. Dustin followed immediately. Lucas looked wary, but still climbed in beside Dustin, pushing Will into the front seat. All four now turned their eyes to Mike waiting for his move. Seeing the squished interior, the size of the car, the touch of blood peeking out of Eleven's nose already, Mike shook his head and backed away from the car. He still smiled, a way to reassure El and the boys that he had faith it would all be safe.

The smile was enough. El moved back to the space beside Mike and focused on the car. It shook and the boys lurched, clutching anything solid they could get a hold of. After a moment of nothing happening, the car shook again and lifted off the ground at the tilt of El's chin upward, levitating for a few seconds as the boys peered out at the world below. Then, the car drifted forward, slowly at first, but then it glided through the air, over the roof of their bus and back around as the boys hooted above. In that moment, it looked like they could reach the stars.

The blood was dripping from her nose now, enough that Mike reached out and place a hand on her shoulder. She understood her limitations better than Mike and slowly lowered the car to the ground.

“Best Christmas present ever!” Dustin shouted over the cheers from Lucas and Will, the boys hitting and pinching each other to assure that truly did happen.

In the middle of chaos, El reached for Mike’s hand and pulled him back towards her discarded backpack. Before he could make a joke of what else she borrowed from his house, El took out a box of Eggo’s and pressed them into his hands as shyly as she had the mixtape. “Present.”

Mike looked down at the box and it looked like all the memories they had ever shared together packaged up with yellow cardboard. He smiled down at her, hugging the box close to his chest. El stepped forward and leaned up, pressing a chaste kiss to his cheek. If the boys were now hollering at them in the background, neither El nor Mike noticed.

The moon shined above them, reflecting off the light dusting of snow on the ground, and they were both glowing.

### **Author's Note:**

1) Sorry to my boy Mike, but El would most definitely have gone to live with the Byers. She has the bond with Joyce and how would Mike have ever convinced Classic 80s Dad™ to adopt a new child?

2) Title brought to you by Phil Collins and his gift to mankind – the Tarzan soundtrack.

Thank you so much for reading!